Klara Kelley and Harris Francis

Canyon de Chelly National Monument
Ethnographic Resources

Canyon de Chelly National Monument, in Arizona, is on land that belongs to the Navajo Nation, which manages the monument jointly with the Park Service. The monument is the only one on Indian-owned land and was one of the first to have an Indian superintendent, Herbert Yazhe, a member of the Navajo Tribe. The monument was created in 1931, but Navajos have occupied it for centuries. Today, more than 60 families still occupy and use their family lands in the canyon and around its rim. They try to live their lives amid the stares of thousands of tourists who crowd the luxury motels and campgrounds of neighboring Chinle by night and tour the canyon by day. The monument has one concessioner, Thunderbird Lodge, whose huge trucks bring most tourists into the canyon. Other tourists pay Navajo guides to escort them into the canyon on foot, on horseback, or in the tourists' own vehicle. Tourists aren't allowed into the canyon without a Navajo guide, and guiding provides a living for members of several canyon families that partly compensates for the disruption of daily activities by the tourists, who collectively may spend almost as many person-days in the canyons during the year as all the residents combined.

In the spring of 1990, as employees of the Navajo Nation's Historic Preservation Department, we interviewed several Navajos for a small ethnographic research project on the monument partly funded by the National Park Service (NPS). The purpose was to identify places of particular cultural significance and concern to Navajos who live in and use the monument. Later, we received more NPS funding for more interviewing, which we did in the early summer of 1992.

Limits on time and money in both phases of this project allowed us to interview a total of 16 people, a group too small to represent a cross section of resident families and others who use the canyon and its rims for Navajo cultural purposes. To get as wide a range of information as possible, we tried to talk to people with as many different interests in the canyon as possible. The group includes residents of different parts of the monument, non-resident users, medicine people, guides, women and men, old and relatively young, people interested mainly in the Navajo occupation in the last few centuries, and others interested mainly in the canyon's role in Navajo ceremonialism.

Spider Rock at Canyon de Chelly National Monument, Arizona. NPS photo.

We learned about people to interview from Mr. Yazhe and his staff, many of whom belong to canyon families. We also knew of people from our previous work around Navajoland and from one of the authors' having grown up in the neighboring community of Chinle.

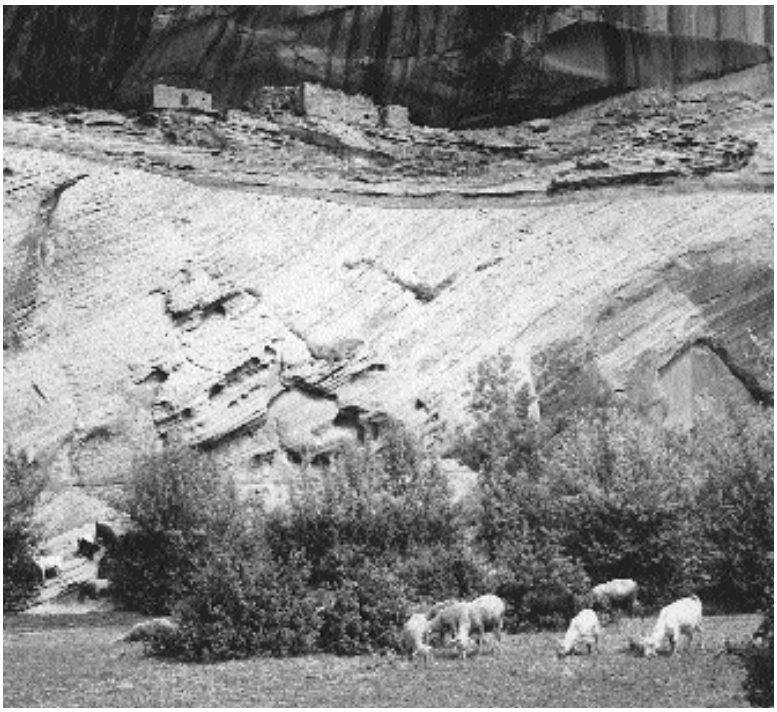
Our interviews were unstructured, the only comfortable way for the people whose help we sought. The Navajo regard for esoteric knowledge as personal power not to be given away for free resembles, but is much older than, the modern legal notion of "intellectual property." So in requesting help from such people, you must not only offer a fee, but also let the person control the conversation. That way, everyone is more likely to enjoy it.

Most of the interviews occurred at people's homes, where we used maps and recorded place names to identify the locations of significant places and events. Some interviews occurred on tours of parts of the two branches of the canyon, Canyon de Chelly and Canyon del Muerto, and around the rims. Two people were interviewed both at homes and later on a tour. Most of the interviewees, both at homes and on tours, were recorded on audio tape, usually in Navajo. We have produced English transcripts of these tapes.

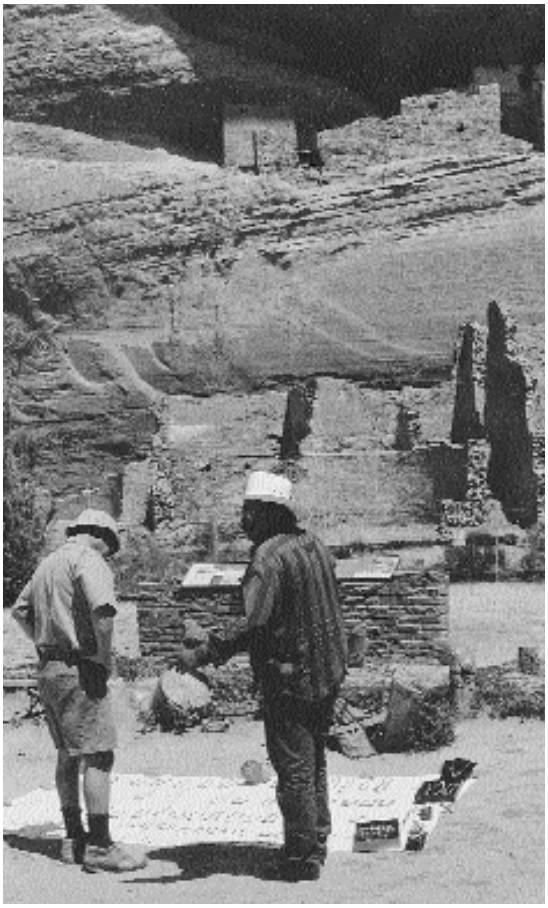
These transcripts gave us one of the most important insights to result from this study: that the interview setting affects what people tell, especially how they convey cultural geography. On a tour, the route itself dictates the sequence in which the person identifies particular places. At home, the person is more likely to mention places by telling a story or ceremonial sequence that interconnects a group of places. Actually travelling on the land, then, ironically minimizes the conceptual connections among places that bind them into culturally-constructed landscapes. Tours are essential, though, to pin down exact locations of many places, to help people recall more places than they would at home, and to prompt visualized, and the more detailed, accounts of what happened at certain places.

Talking about places in these two types of settings, it turns out, approximates how the people themselves learned about many places: an older person (grandparent, medicine person) at home would tell the learner about the place, often in the context of a story, and would identify it by name, describe its appearance and situation. The learner would actually visit the place some other time, alone or with the older person or someone else who had already been there and perhaps had more to tell about it.

We noticed another interesting pattern. The canyon residents we interviewed, not surprisingly, emphasized places within their own customary use areas. More surprisingly, they told different stories about widely-known sacred places in those areas than non-residents told about those same places. The non-residents referred to stories known all over Navajoland about the origin of particular Navajo ceremonies, beliefs, and customs. They referred specifically to the episodes of these stories that occurred at particular places in the canyon. The residents told about encounters between family members and immortal personages ("Holy People") or unusual manifestations of power that go with these places according to the widely known origin stories. The residents' stories linked the family through personal experi-



Navajo sheep grazing near Junction ruins, the cliff masonry construction by earlier American Indian people at Canyon de Chelly, Arizona. NPS photo.



Canyon de Chelly White House Ruins, Navajo jewelry seller, and tourist. Photo by Klara Kelley.

ences with the forces of Navajo creation. The customary use areas are geographical zones embodying a family's history, and at these places they articulate with larger, more extensive landscapes relating to Navajo origins. The different emphases of residents and nonresidents are necessary to see the various culturally-constructed landscapes and how they overlap and intersect. There seems to be a comparable difference in perspectives of residents and nonresidents on the relation of the canyon to more recent Navajo history, especially that of the 18th and 19th centuries when the canyon was a major Navajo refuge from Spanish, Mexican, and U.S. armies and slave raiders, both non-Indian and Indian.

We have also compared the list of the places identified by the eight people we interviewed in 1990 with those in a manuscript inventory of places in Canyon de Chelly (not del Muerto) sent to us by Professor Stephen Jett (University of California, Davis). The manuscript is based on the literature of two decades of intensive work of Professor Jett and Mr. Chauncey Neboyia, a lifelong canyon resident and guide, and William Morgan, a Navajo specialist in linguistics.* Our little Phase I study identified 41 places, 32 (80%) of which correspond to 35 (25%) of the 139 places that Jett and Neboyia identify. In view of the great differences in time and effort between the two studies, the overlap is surprisingly high. It is probably best explained by the extensive web of kinship among canyon residents and by everyone's use of the same routes into and out of the canyon.

Most of the people who talked with us emphasized their struggle to keep Navajo customary uses of the canyon alive in the face of the escalating tourist onslaught; armed pothunters sneaking into the backcountry; escalating erosion from vehicle traffic in the canyons and timber cutting in the Navajo forest; and dwindling interest in Navajo ways of life among young Navajos. As a canyon resident and medicine man told us,

> It's good that people are teaching the children tradition again. We've learned what happens when we forget our culture. We have experienced lots of bad things, the rains have gone and stayed away, the plants don't grow as they used to. Our livestock are few and weak. That is our mainstay in life, our livestock and the land...Now there are those of you who have started talking about these things and are trying to do something about it to help us...You are just starting out, beginning the ceremony. After a while it will be good...With these programs, involve the people, us people also, we would like to have input into these things.

Note

* Jett, Stephen C., Chauncey M. Neboyia and William Morgan Sr. *Placenames and Trails of the Canyon de Chelly System, Arizona.* 1992. Manuscript in authors' possession.

The authors have worked together continuously since 1987 interviewing Navajos in various parts of Navajoland about protecting places of cultural significance and the cultural and religious rights of Navajo people. Before 1993 they worked for the Navajo Nation's Archaeology and Historic Preservation Departments. Since then they have continued as independent consultants. Harris Francis draws on his fluency in the Navajo language, his customary Navajo upbringing, and experience as a social worker and paralegal. He is Tachii'nii clan born for Tabaaha. Klara Kelley received her Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of New Mexico in 1977, has conducted fieldwork in Navajoland for 28 years, and has written two books, journal articles, and technical reports. Kelley and Francis are the authors of Navajo Sacred Places *(Indiana University Press, 1994).*